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RETURN TO SAN NICOLAS

In the May issue of the MUSEUM LEAFLET there appeared a map of the Channel Islands of California and a brief account of San Nicolas Island and the three trips Mr. Orr and Mr. Rett made during the spring. Those and the present trip were made possible through Navy sanction and assistance which included transportation by plane to and from the Island and by jeep during exploration and field work on the Island. Here, Mr. Orr tells of the September trip.

THERE is something about an island which draws one back. An easily accessible piece of barren wind-swept land, a few miles in extent, with scant vegetation and an abominable climate is not likely to inspire any great interest. But let such a piece of land be surrounded by water and be accessible only at risk of life and limb by a surf landing in a small boat, and it has a romantic and magnetic appeal.

San Nicolas is just such a spot. Being an isolated piece of land in the midst of ocean, its natural history interest is greater than that of its mainland counterpart, for on it are strange plants, animals and Indian remains. But in addition to the natural history, San Nicolas has a charm of its own that lies in its very bleak ruggedness and desolation.

After just having completed the fourth trip to San Nicolas, we want to go back again.

The first three trips were made during February, March and April. Fog, wind and cold made the nickname "Little Attu" quite appropriate although there were wild flowers and the velvet green carpet of grasses which covered parts of the Island.

September's trip, however, showed that San Nicolas could be nice, for the weather was the kind that California and Florida would always like to have—balmy days, cool nights, with just enough wind to keep the air fresh.

On this last flight to San Nicolas, it was a surprise, after leaving the burnt brown hills of the mainland, to see San Nicolas with large green patches in a field of gray. Upon landing at the air strip, we were again surprised to find the lupine and morning glories still blooming. These had been in full bloom in the spring.

Our old friends of last spring—the horned larks, rock wrens and house finches, were still in evidence, and among the numerous migratory birds Mr. Rett observed, there were some which had never before been reported from the Island.

Other old friends which had given Mr. Rett some trouble to collect last spring were the ravens. These birds were wary and it had been difficult to get within range of them, but now that he had his collection, one flew down and almost lit on his gun. To shoot would have been fatal—not only for the raven, but for us, for this was a pet of our friend the cook, and we certainly wanted to keep on the good side of him. Several pet ravens hung around the camp and came at his call, and when he was “jeeping” with us over the Island, Jim, Blackie and Sue would fly for miles following us.

On our previous trip we had hunted for the Island Night Lizards that were said to live on the Island, but only one specimen was found. This time, we learned their habits and found many. This island species of lizard is the only reptile on the Island, and has been found on three islands of the southern group—San Nicolas, San Clemente and Santa Barbara Islands.

These lizards, like the island foxes and mice, are descendants of those which inhabited this area during the Pleistocene period, about a million years ago, when the present islands were still a part of the mainland. These isolated species have become differentiated from those of the mainland. Although this lizard belongs to a family of night lizards, it, unlike its mainland relatives, is diurnal and scampers about cactus patches and under boards and stones in broad daylight.

Seven specimens were collected, but the larger lizards

spurned the black bugs we put in their cage, preferring to eat the little lizards, so we arrived with only five.

During previous visits it had been impossible to explore the western end of the Island because of military restrictions. On this occasion we were able to explore it when, by the aid of radio and radar reports, it was known that there would be no target practice in the area.

The western end is lower than the plateau as a whole, running out to a long point projecting into the sea, and some seven miles further out, the white spray of waves can be seen dashing over Begg Rock. Vegetation is nonexistent except for a few small patches around springs. The remainder is a waste of sand and rock, with huge long ridges of Indian shell mounds, glistening white in the sun.

By jeep we reached the top of the Island and then began a trip which would have completely wrecked a civilian car. There was no road. There wasn't even any smooth ground. Ditches and gullies four feet deep were crossed. Rocks two feet high were “jumped.” Always the grade was downward, like the roof of a house. We began to wonder if we would be able to find a way out for it was obvious we could never retrace our tracks.

Rounding a great Indian mound which stretched for a half a mile down the coast, we came to the edge of the sea, where the waves dashed over the brownish red rocks, giving a hollow booming sound from the innumerable caves along this stretch of coast. Ahead of us was a sight which we had longed to see on our other expeditions, but which we had never been fortunate enough to encounter. Hundreds of sea lions sunned themselves on the rocks.

The jeep roared along and the creatures paid no heed to the noise, so we stopped and started to walk toward them in an effort to get pictures. That was another matter. With a pandemonium of barks, screeches and bellows, the whole herd waddled, with unbelievable speed, to the water's edge and

dived in. Clouds of countless pelicans rose from the rocks and went flapping lazily along over the waves.

In the distance, a big black rock attracted our attention because, from the geologist's point of view, it was out of place in the midst of gray and red. But upon coming close enough to distinguish detail, we saw that it was a living covering which rose as black smoke when the thousands of cormorants resting there took to the air.

Another small group of sea lions attracted our attention. These lay sunning themselves across a little inlet. Crawling cautiously so as not to disturb them, and pushing along the camera equipped with telephoto lens, we worked up to the edge of the cliff. Just on the point of taking our pictures, we looked down and there, immediately below us and no more than eight feet away, was an old sea lion cow preening herself in the sun. Behind her were more cows of all sizes and ages and two baby sea lions playing in a "wading pool."

The young sea lions, born in the early summer, have to be taught to swim and these youngsters were playing in a little tide pool on the rocks much as children might.

Old bulls sat on the rocks farther out, apparently acting as lookouts, but if they saw us, they must have assumed we were merely one of the family, for they made no effort to leave, until, finishing our picture-taking, we stood up. Then with bellows of warning and the screams of frightened cows the whole colony dived into the sea.

We continued on into the Indian mounds. Words cannot describe the vastness of these mounds. They stretch for hundreds of yards, and the piles of shell reach up and up. Where one mound begins and another ends is almost impossible to tell, for the intermediate ground is just slightly less covered with the debris of long-vanished peoples.

At one place we found half-finished mortars. Huge boulders, which must have taken a great deal of labor to bring from the beach, were partly cut out with rude flint tools.

In another spot the remains of a hut composed of whale ribs lay on the surface. It was just such a hut as this, in approximately this area that the famous lone woman of San Nicolas lived, but no evidence remained after nearly one hundred years to prove that this was her home.

Considering the great number of mounds and their size, one of the disappointments of the expeditions had been the very few burials uncovered.

Driving down the steep side of a shell mound, we stopped in astonishment, for beside us lay five human skeletons from which the sand had been blown, exposing the bones without seriously disturbing them. This was the life that every bone-digger hopes for—just pick up the bones and not have to dig for them. In a few minutes we had accomplished more without labor than we often did in days of sweating on the end of a shovel handle.

A few days later we uncovered definite proof of the reason we had found so few burials for several cremated burials were found showing that at some stage of the Nicóíños culture they had burned their dead as the Shoshone mainlanders did. The few burials we did find which were not cremated showed that on other occasions the Chumash burial customs were practiced.

How long San Nicolas had been inhabited is an unsolved problem. That it was a long time is attested by the great number and size of the mounds and the badly eroded conditions of some. In an effort to give some basis for calculating the lapse of time since individual mounds were abandoned, measurements were made using brass plates set flush with the ground. In spite of the heavy winds and rain no appreciable erosion had taken place in the five months between the first and last trips. We hope to go back to San Nicolas and re-measure these stakes. Ten or twenty years from now we should have a much better basis for estimating the time since these mounds were abandoned.

P.C.O.